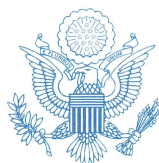


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## Congress of the United States House of Representatives

May 13, 2021

**TOM COLE**  
4TH DISTRICT, OKLAHOMA

DEPUTY WHIP

**COMMITTEE ON RULES**  
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**COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS**  
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LABOR, HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES,  
EDUCATION AND RELATED AGENCIES –  
RANKING REPUBLICAN  
DEFENSE

The Honorable Miguel Cardona, Ed.D.  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Ave SW  
Washington, DC 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona,

I write to urge you to withdraw the proposed priorities for the American History and Civics Education programs that were published in the Federal Register on April 19, 2021. It is clear from the content of the priorities, as well as the accompanying justification for their proposal, that they will do little more than erode bipartisan support for expanding civics education in the United States by promoting questionable, divisive, and politicized scholarship.

It is no secret that civics education in America is in crisis. Only a quarter of school children have demonstrated proficiency in civics according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Students scored even lower on the NAEP's history assessment.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, a study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center determined that 75 percent of Americans could not accurately identify the three branches of government, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation found only 36 percent of Americans could pass the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services' naturalization test – a test that nearly 98 percent of immigrant test-takers pass.<sup>2,3</sup>

For this reason, I partnered with colleagues in the House and Senate, representing both Republicans and Democrats, to introduce the Civics Secures Democracy Act, which would provide \$1 billion annually toward promoting civics education in elementary and secondary education.<sup>4</sup> This bill represents bipartisan consensus regarding the need to address civics illiteracy and to educate America's youth on her founding principles, documents, and system of governance.

It is my commitment to civics education that leads me to oppose your department's proposed priorities. These priorities do nothing to ameliorate this pressing problem and threaten to upend bipartisan support for increasing investments in civics education. In the proposed priorities, your department lauds *The New York Times'* 1619 Project as an example of "teaching and learning that reflects the breadth and depth of our

<sup>1</sup> "How Did U.S. Students Perform on the Most Recent Assessments?" *The Nation's Report Card*, <https://www.nationsreportcard.gov>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

<sup>2</sup> "Americans are Poorly Informed About Basic Constitutional Provisions." *Annenberg Public Policy Center*, <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/americans-are-poorly-informed-about-basic-constitutional-provisions>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

<sup>3</sup> "National Survey Finds Just 1 in 3 Americans Would Pass Citizenship Test." *The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation*. <https://woodrow.org/news/national-survey-finds-just-1-in-3-americans-would-pass-citizenship-test>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

<sup>4</sup> "Civics Secures Democracy Act of 2021." *Congress.gov*. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1814?s=1&r=2>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

Nation's diverse history" and demands that grant applicants incorporate practices that highlight our "ongoing national reckoning with systemic racism." It also cites Ibram X. Kendi and his views on "anti-racism."<sup>5</sup>

These references and statements are concerning for a number of reasons. As a former history professor, I certainly support offering diverse perspectives in education, and the goal of the 1619 Project to elevate oft-marginalized stories and individuals in American history is understandable. However, to cite this project as accurate historical analysis is to do damage to history education in American schools because of its well-documented errors.

The 1619 Project was not developed by trained historians and has been the subject of criticism from leading members of academia concerning its credibility. Gordon Wood, Professor Emeritus of History at Brown University, has called the project "so wrong in so many ways."<sup>6</sup> Wood and four other eminent historians authored a letter to the *Times* in December 2019, writing that the project's errors, "which concern major events, cannot be described as interpretation or 'framing.' They are matters of verifiable fact, which are the foundation of both honest scholarship and honest journalism. They suggest a displacement of historical understanding by ideology."<sup>7</sup> Princeton University history professor Sean Wilentz, one of the signatories and an expert on the American Revolution, expounded on his concerns and further stated "no matter how the history is interpreted and related, [it] cannot be forwarded through falsehoods, distortions, and significant omissions."<sup>8</sup> Unsparring in his criticism, Adolph Reed, Jr., Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania, said the 1619 Project "reflects the agenda of the Democratic Party today."<sup>9</sup>

If you are not familiar with the "falsehoods, distortions, and significant omissions" of the 1619 Project, chief among them are its claims concerning the basis of the American Revolution. In the project's introductory essay, Nicole Hannah-Jones makes the claim that "one of the primary reasons the colonists decided to declare their independence from Britain was because they wanted to protect the institution of slavery."<sup>10</sup> In reducing the American Revolution to little more than a slaveholders' rebellion, this project swats aside the weight of historical evidence and primary sources that run counter to this claim. This assertion disregards the leading role northern colonies took as pioneers of the abolition movement and the influence they had on the abolition of the slave trade, and slavery as a whole, worldwide, as well as the revolution "being a primary *disrupter* of slavery in the North American Colonies."<sup>11,12</sup> While the 1619 Project argues it was anti-slavery sentiment in Great Britain, and the resulting colonial fears of impending abolition, that catalyzed the revolution, historical evidence – and indeed the timeline itself – reveals that an organized anti-slavery movement in America predated a comparative movement in Great Britain and, in fact, influenced abolitionism there.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Proposed Priorities—American History and Civics Education, 86 Fed. Reg. 20348 (April 19, 2021)

<sup>6</sup> Mackaman, Tom. "An interview with historian Gordon Wood on the New York Times' 1619 Project." *World Socialist Web Site*. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/11/28/wood-n28.html>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

<sup>7</sup> "We Respond to the Historians Who Critiqued the 1619 Project." *The New York Times Magazine*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/magazine/we-respond-to-the-historians-who-critiqued-the-1619-project.html>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Wilentz, Sean. "A Matter of Facts." *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/1619-project-new-york-times-wilentz/605152>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

<sup>9</sup> Mackaman, Tom. "An interview with political scientist Adolph Reed, Jr. on the New York Times' 1619 Project." *World Socialist Web Site*. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/12/20/reed-d20.html>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Hannah-Jones, Nicole. "Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true." *The New York Times Magazine*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/black-history-american-democracy.html>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Mackaman, Tom. "An interview with historian Gordon Wood on the New York Times' 1619 Project."

<sup>12</sup> Harris, Leslie M. "I Helped Fact-Check the 1619 Project. The Times Ignored Me." *POLITICO*.

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/03/06/1619-project-new-york-times-mistake-122248>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Wilentz, Sean. "A Matter of Facts."

Furthermore, the emphasis of the 1619 Project and your department on critical race theory and teaching students that America is irredeemably and systemically racist disregards the complex, differing viewpoints on slavery, race, and discrimination that have existed since our founding, as well as the significant progress America has made. The 1619 Project posits that “anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country.”<sup>14</sup> While America has worked haltingly throughout her history to extend equal rights and protection under the law to all her children, the notion that America is systemically racist glosses over other moments, individuals, and truths of our history. As Princeton University historian James McPherson explains:

The idea that racism is a permanent condition, well that’s just not true. And it also doesn’t account for the countervailing tendencies in American history as well. Because opposition to slavery, and opposition to racism, has also been an important theme in American history...From the Quakers in the 18th century, on through the abolitionists in the antebellum, to the radical Republicans in the Civil War and Reconstruction, to the NAACP which was an interracial organization founded in 1909, down through the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, there have been a lot of whites who have fought against slavery and racial discrimination, and against racism. Almost from the beginning of American history that’s been true. And that’s what’s missing from this perspective.<sup>15</sup>

Historian James Oakes, Distinguished Professor of History and Graduate School Humanities Professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, further explains that such notions are:

not only ahistorical, they’re actually anti-historical. The function of those tropes is to deny change over time...We’re all in the same boat we were back then. And that’s what original sin is. It’s passed down. Every single generation is born with the same original sin. And the worst thing about it is that it leads to political paralysis. It’s always been here. There’s nothing we can do to get out of it. If it’s the DNA, there’s nothing you can do. What do you do? Alter your DNA?<sup>16</sup>

While furthering the idea that racism is an immutable characteristic of the nation, the department also paradoxically supports schools “working to incorporate anti-racist practices into teaching and learning,” suggesting that systemic racism is something that can be overcome after all.<sup>17</sup> Racism cannot be both unconquerable and vanquishable. As a tribal citizen, I support teaching and learning practices that instill respect for other races, ethnicities, and cultures. However, I have reservations as to what the department’s understanding of “anti-racism” entails, and its relation to civics education, particularly because of its quotation of Ibram X. Kendi, who has written, “The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination. The only remedy to present discrimination is future discrimination.”<sup>18</sup> That the U.S. Department of Education would lend credence to the notion that the answer to historical injustices is to commit present and future ones is alarming.

For these reasons, I urge you to withdraw these proposed priorities. Civics education is meant to inform our nation’s students on the principles and history of our founding and system of governance. It is meant to foster civic participation and to unite Americans of different races, faiths, and backgrounds around a set of common ideals, forging “out of many, one.” In your appearance before the House Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, you endorsed this idea, sharing, “Yes, we have a

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<sup>14</sup> Hannah-Jones, Nicole. “Our democracy’s founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true.”

<sup>15</sup> Mackaman, Tom. “An interview with historian James McPherson on the New York Times’ 1619 Project.” *World Socialist Web Site*. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/11/14/mcph-n14.html>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Mackaman, Tom. “An interview with historian James Oakes on the New York Times’ 1619 Project.” *World Socialist Web Site*. <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/11/18/oake-n18.html>. Accessed 12 May 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Proposed Priorities—American History and Civics Education, 86 Fed. Reg. 20349 (April 19, 2021)

<sup>18</sup> Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Antiracist*. Random House, 2019.

divided country, but our education system is going to unite us. Again, the goal here is to really build community.”<sup>19</sup>

If the goal is unity and to build community, these proposed priorities will not achieve it. These priorities are deeply divisive, and the elevation of dubious historical scholarship suggests the importance of political narrative over historical fact in civics education. Moreover, the American people do not want federal mandates on the content of their children’s education material. In our hearing, your answers on the topic were both contradictory and unclear, especially when you stated the department cannot mandate curriculum but then admitted it could issue certain priorities it wants grantees to include in their applications.<sup>20</sup> These answers are sharply at odds with one another.

While I disagree strongly with these priorities and ask for their withdrawal, I would like to extend the offer to work with you on a more bipartisan approach to civics education. Though these priorities are misguided as proposed, I appreciate the intent to incorporate diverse perspectives in history and civics education because I personally understand the importance of race in American history.

I am a member of the Chickasaw Nation. My great-great grandfather was forcibly removed from Mississippi where his family had lived for 500 years. At age 14, he was marched 800 miles to Indian Territory. He and his family lost everything, and my family lost everything again when the state was opened to white settlement and tribal governments were all but dissolved.

But I also know the other side of American history. My great aunt Te Ata, a Chickasaw storyteller and performing artist, has her portrait in the state capital and a 12-foot statue at the college from which she graduated. She delivered the first state entertainment in the Franklin D. Roosevelt White House in March 1933 and performed before the King and Queen of England and the Roosevelts at Hyde Park in 1938. My Chickasaw uncle, whose name I bear, fought at Bataan, was part of the Death March, and survived Japanese prison camps. My father was a career noncommissioned officer, my mom was the first Native American woman elected to the Oklahoma State Senate, and I now serve in Congress. My great-great and great grandfathers, the Chief Clerk of the Chickasaw Supreme Court and the Treasurer of the Chickasaw Nation, respectively, would never have believed it. I hardly believe it myself.

That is what I am interested in celebrating — the nation and the institutions that made that journey possible, even in the face of adversity. I understand that America is imperfect. But I also know that it is on a journey to becoming “a more perfect Union.”

Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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TOM COLE  
Member of Congress

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<sup>19</sup> House Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Subcommittee, *FY2022 Budget Request for the Department of Education*, oral testimony of Miguel Cardona, May 5, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*